MYSTICISM

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Translator's note. Michel de Certeau was an eminent historian at the time that this article was published in the Encyclopaedia universalis *(1968) [rpt. 15 (1990): 1030–36 (Paris)]. Well known in France for his earlier studies of mysticism—in particular his work on Favre, his edition of Surin's* Guide spirituel *(1963), and his monumental* Correspondance *of Surin (1966)—de Certeau also pursued studies in psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, semiotics, linguistics, and contemporary culture. In "Mysticism" de Certeau examines the development of relations between a scientific discourse that reified the mystical as an object of inquiry in accordance with its own categories and methodologies, and a mystical "language" that both integrated and interrogated that discourse on the basis of a lived experience exceeding its capacities. De Certeau continues his analysis of mysticism in* La fable mystique *(1982), translated by Michael Smith as* The Mystic Fable, *where he examines "the relations of this 'modern' mysticism with a new eroticism, with a psychoanalytic theory, with historiography itself, and finally with the 'fable' (that returns simultaneously to orality and to fiction)" [12].*

The masculine gendering of the word mystic *(le mystique) and its accompanying pronouns in this article is primarily due to French usage. The word* mystique *without any article functions in French as the adjective* mystical; *with a feminine article (la mystique) the word means "mysticism," and with a masculine article (le mystique) it means "the mystic," irrespective of that mystic's gender.*

I am very grateful to Luce Giard for her generous and invaluable assistance in the translation of this essay; in addition, I would like to thank Agnes Chouchan and Michael Smith for their careful editing of the text.

To Freud's analysis of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1926), Romain Rolland opposed a "religious sensation completely different from religions in the strict sense": a "sensation of the eternal," an "oceanic feeling" that could be described as a "contact" and as a "fact" [letter to S. Freud, 5 Dec. 1927]. Rolland sent Freud the three volumes of his *Essai sur la mystique et l'action de l'Inde vivante* upon publication in 1929; Freud responded to his objections in the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929). He moreover wrote to his "friend," "How foreign to me are the worlds in which you circulate! Mysticism is as impenetrable to me as music" [20 July 1929]. Later, Freud would object to the assimilation of his method with that of Jung's, who, he said, "is something of a mystic himself and has ceased for a many years to belong to our group" [letter to R. Rolland, 19 Jan. 1930].

A significant debate. It was recorded over a period of thirty years in a particularly rich group of publications dedicated to mysticism; these publications include contributions from ethnosociology (in France, for example, from Emile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [1912] to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *L'expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs* [1938]); from phenomenology (from Heiler to Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade); from literary history (*The Mystical Element of Religion* by Friedrich von Hügel [1908] to the eleven volumes of *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux* by Henri Brémond [1917–32]); from philosophy (notably William James in 1906, Maurice Blondel, Jean Baruzi in 1924, Henri Bergson in 1932); from the diffusion of Hinduism and Indian Buddhism in Western Europe, to which Romain Rolland, René Guénon, and Aldous Huxley contributed, in addition to L. de La Vallée-Poussin, Olivier Lacombe, Louis Renou, and others. This abundant output has included positions that are quite different, but it seems to have in common the connection of mysticism to the primitive mentality, to a marginal and threatened tradition existing within Christian churches, to an intuition that had become foreign to the intellectual understanding, or better still, to an Orient where the sun of "meaning" would rise at the moment that it set in the West. From the beginning, the mysticism discussed in these works had for its place an *elsewhere* and for its sign an *anti-society* which nevertheless would represent the initial ground [*fonds*] of man. A way of considering and defining mysticism that we still recognize today dates from this period; it is in this climate that Freud's reaction was situated.

The disagreement that appeared in the letters and works of these two correspondents between 1927 and 1930 is characteristic of the perspectives that opposed—and continue to oppose—a "mystical" point of view to a "scientific" one. Romain Rolland describes, in the manner of Bergson, a *donnée* of experience—"something without limits, infinite, in a word, oceanic"; Freud finds only a *production* of the psyche born from the combination of a representation and an affective element, itself susceptible to being interpreted as a "genetic derivation." Rolland refers to a "subterranean source of religious energy," distinguishing it from its appropriation or channeling by the Church; Freud returns to the "constitution of the self" according to a process of separation from the mother's womb and differentiation from the outer world. Of course, both return to an origin; for the former, this appears in the form of the *All* and has its most explicit manifestation in the Orient; for the latter, it is the *primitive* experience of a wrenching away [*arrachement*], the beginning of individual or collective history. In sum, for Romain Rolland the origin is the *unity* that just "breaks through" ["*affleure*"] to the surface of consciousness; for Freud it is the *division* constitutive of the self. Nevertheless, the fact which both must explain is of the same type: a dissent of the individual in relation to the group; an irreducibility of desire within the society that represses or masks it without eliminating it; a "discontent within civilization." The unstable relationships between science and truth revolve around this fact.

1

The Modern Status of Mysticism

Whatever one thinks of mysticism, even if one recognizes in it the emergence of a universal or absolute reality, it can only be treated in terms of a specific cultural and historical situation. The West, whether it is considering shamanism, Hinduism, or Meister Eckhart, has its own way of regarding mysticism; it speaks about it from a certain position. One would not therefore know how to sanction the fiction of a universal discourse about mysticism, thereby forgetting that the East Indian, the African, or the Indonesian have neither the same conception of nor the same practices for what we call mysticism.

Geographical Determination and Historical Conditioning

The attention directed by European analyses toward the mysticism of others is guided more or less explicitly by internal interrogations and disputes, even when these analyses consider foreign traditions. For example, the scientific inquiry into Hinduism or Buddhism was (and still is) inhabited by the "uneasiness" that the irruption of different civilizations and the erosion of Christian beliefs aroused in Europe, by the nostalgia for spiritual references detached from Church allegiances, or by the opposite desire to better adapt the diffusion of European Christian thought to the Orient and to restore a universal that would no longer derive from the power of the Occidentals, but rather from their knowledge. The relationships that the European world maintained with itself and others had therefore a determining role in the definition, the experience, and the analysis of mysticism. This statement does not by any means deny mystical experience its authenticity or these analyses their rigor; it only emphasizes their particularity.

This localization of "our" point of view also obeys historical determinations. In the course of our history, "one" place has been given to mysticism; it has been assigned, within social or scientific life, a region of its own, with its own objects, itineraries, and language. In particular, from the time that European culture had ceased to define itself as Christian—that is, since the sixteenth or seventeenth century—one no longer designated as mystical that form of "wisdom" elevated by a full recognition of the mystery already lived and announced in common beliefs, but rather an experimental knowledge that slowly detached itself from traditional theology or church institutions, characterized by the consciousness, received or acquired, of a fulfilling passivity in which the self loses itself in God. In other words, what becomes mystical is that which diverges from normal or ordinary paths; that which is no longer inscribed within the social community of faith or religious references, but rather on the margins of an increasingly secularized society and a knowledge that defines its own scientific objects; that which thus appears simultaneously in the form of extraordinary, even strange, events and as a relationship with a hidden God ("mystical" in Greek means "hidden") whose public signs pale, flicker, or completely cease to be believable.

One indication of this isolation (in the sense in which any element can be isolated) appears in the fact that it is only in the seventeenth century that one begins to speak of "la mystique"; the recourse to this noun corresponds to the establishment of a specific domain. Previously "mystique" was only an adjective that qualified something else; it could be assigned to all types of knowledge or objects in a still religious world. The substantivation of this adjective in the first half of the seventeenth century, a time in which mystical literature proliferated, was a sign of the great division [*découpage*] that occurred

concerning knowledge and facts. A certain space would delimit, from this point on, a mode of experience, a genre of discourse, an area of knowledge. At the same time that its proper name appeared (designating at that time a novelty), mysticism constituted itself in a place apart. It circumscribed isolatable facts ("extraordinary" phenomena), social types (the "mystics," another neologism of the time), and a special science (elaborated by the mystics themselves or taking them as its object of analysis).

What was new was not mystical life—since this undoubtedly had been initiated in the very beginnings of religious history—but its isolation and objectification in the eyes of those who began to be unable to participate or believe in the principles upon which it was established.

In becoming a specialty, mysticism found itself limited to the margins of the sector of the observable. It would be subjected to the paradox growing from an opposition between particular phenomena (classed as exceptional) and the universal meaning—or one true God—of which mystics claimed to be the witnesses. Mysticism would progressively be divided between strange phenomena—the objects of a curiosity sometimes devout, sometimes psychological, psychiatric, or ethnographic—and the Absolute the mystics spoke of, which would be situated in the invisible, regarded as an obscure, universal dimension of man, perceived or experienced as a reality [*un réel*] hidden beneath a diversity of institutions, religions, and doctrines. It is in this second aspect that one draws closer to what Romain Rolland called the "oceanic feeling."

The position given to mysticism by Western societies over three centuries would determine, then, the theoretical and practical problems posed to mystical experience. But it would also determine the optic by which mysticism (whatever time or civilization it belonged to) would be viewed from then on: an organization proper to "modern" Western society defines the place from which we speak of mysticism.

The Tradition and Psychologization of Mysticism

This determination has led to two sorts of effects, equally perceptible in the experience of mystics as they describe it and in the studies dedicated to them: the formation of a particular tradition and the "psychologization" of mystical states.

From the place that had been made for them, the mystics, their apologists, and their critics established a tradition that responded to this recently isolated unity in conformity with what had occurred in other fields of research. For example, once biology had been defined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it served as a basis for a classification of past knowledge, selecting from it problems that were analogical to those it was then treating. A distinction was made in ancient works (through a split that would have greatly surprised their authors) between what was "scientific" and could thus enter into the history of biology, and what was theological, cosmological, and so on. A modern science thus gave itself a specific tradition, excavated, in accordance with its present, from the sediments of the past. Similarly, the newly "isolated" mysticism found itself, from the seventeenth century on, endowed with a complete genealogy. The identification of similarities presented in the works of ancient authors authorized on the one hand the gathering of diverse works under the same name and, on the other, the fragmentation of the same literary corpus according to the modern categories of exegesis, theology, and mysticism. It became possible to distinguish in the works of a patristic writer, in a medieval group, or within a Nordic school of thought a portion that belonged to mysticism and a level of analysis that corresponded to it. From then on, constellations of references—the "mystical authors"—defined an object that conformed to a certain viewpoint. A "treasure" was formed in three centuries that constituted a "mystical tradition" and obeyed less and less the criteria of any particular Church membership.

Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, ancient, and finally nonreligious testimonies were assembled under the same singular noun: *la mystique*. The identity of "mysticism," once posited, created relevant criteria, imposed a reclassification of history, and permitted the establishment of facts and texts that served from then on as a foundation for any study of mystics. Reflection and experience itself are both determined today by this work of collating such a diversity of information and references into one circumscribed place itself defined by a sociocultural conjuncture.

This conjuncture also prompted, as we have seen, the identification of mystical life with a certain number of "phenomena." Extraordinary events characterized mystical experience from the moment it was compelled, in an increasingly de-Christianized society, to migrate inward. Necessarily estranged from more secularized global institutions and rapidly shrinking Church institutions, the lived sense of the Absolute—the universal God—found its privileged indices, internal or external, in phenomena of consciousness. Lived experience became the sign and punctuation of the perception of the infinite. Experience was expressed and deciphered in more psychological terms. Moreover, because religious terminology could no longer be trusted (religious vocabulary continued to circulate, but was progressively detached from its first signification by a society that would from then on assign metaphorical uses to it, using it as a repertoire of images and legends), the mystics were drawn away, by the life they lived and by the situation that was given to them, toward a language of the body. In a new interplay between what they recognized internally and the part of their experience that was externally (socially) recognizable, mystics were led to create from this corporeal vocabulary the initial markers indicating the place in which they found themselves and the illumination they received. Just as Jacob's wound in the hip was the sole visible mark of his nocturnal encounter with the angel, so ecstasy, levitation, stigmata, fasting, insensibility to pain, visions, tactile sensations, odors, and the like furnished the music of the senses with the scale of a specific language.

"Unutterable" Meaning and Psychosomatic "Phenomena"

The mystics created, from all these psychological or physical "phenomena," a means of articulating the "unsayable" [*indicible*]. They spoke of "something" that could really no longer be said in words. They therefore proceeded to a description that ran the gamut of "sensations," allowing us to measure the distance between the common usage of these words and the truth that the mystics, led by their experience, gave to them. This lapse [*décalage*] in meaning, inexpressible in verbal language, could be made visible through the continuous counterpoint of extraordinary psychosomatic phenomena. The "emotions" of affectivity and the alterations of the body thus became the clearest indicators of the movement produced before or after the stability of intellectual formulations. The thread of psychosomatic signs was from then on the borderline that made it possible for mystical experience to be articulated in socially recognizable terms, to be made legible to the eyes of unbelievers. From this viewpoint, mysticism found its modern social language in the body (though, in many respects, an established spiritual vocabulary had once been its medieval "body").

These psychosomatic manifestations were taken seriously by scientific observers. To an inquiry that was successively medical, psychological, psychiatric, sociological, or ethnographic, they provided that part of the experience that science could grasp—mystical "phenomena." In particular, the work of Dr. J. M. Charcot (1825–93) was a fine example of the attention directed by the psychiatrist in the nineteenth century towards a group of cases and events in which a hysterical structure was diagnosed. Bound to its corporeal language, mysticism borders on or overlaps the pathological—all the more

since the "extraordinary" character of mystical perception was increasingly expressed in the nineteenth century by the "abnormality" of psychosomatic phenomena. In this way, mysticism entered the psychiatric hospital and the ethnographic museum of the marvelous.

If, by its own logic, scientific analysis was therefore caught in the trap of a positivism that in advance gives truth value to "objective" facts it defines itself, it was no less determined by the actual sociocultural conditions of the mystical experience. Did not the believers come to confuse mysticism with the miraculous or extraordinary? In the end, medical or ethnological observation went less astray (since it claimed to stay on the terrain of phenomena) than the eminent theologian of the period, Father Auguste Poulain, who, in order to account for the meaning of mysticism, ceaselessly enumerated a collection of stigmata, stories of levitations, psychological "miracles," and somatic curiosities [*Des grâces d'oraison: Traité de théologie mystique* (1901)]; here the lived meaning of experience was assessed according to the degree of psychosomatic awareness of the extraordinary. In the end, such meaning was buried under the proliferation of peculiarities that both Church apologists and scientific observers colluded in amassing.

The reaction provoked by such an extreme position has continued to reiterate, within the last fifty years, the rupture between mystical "phenomena" and the existential radicalism of the experience itself. It is to the latter that the great philosophical and religious studies have been devoted, such as those of Jean Baruzi [*Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique* (1924)], Bergson [*Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932)], and Louis Massignon [*La passion d'al Hallâj, martyr mystique de l'islam* (1922)]. These have had their equivalent in the Christian corpus in the works of Father Maurice de La Taille (1919), Father Maréchal (1924 and 1937), and Dom Stoltz (1937), who, among others, gave back to mysticism its structure and doctrinal meaning. But this "reinvention" of mysticism probably confined itself too exclusively to the philosophical or theological analysis of textual sources, too quickly abandoning the symbolic language of the body to psychology or ethnology.

2

The Mystical Experience

Paradoxes

The mystical, then, appears in paradoxical forms. It seems to drift from one extreme to the other. In one of its aspects, it is on the side of the abnormal, a rhetoric of the strange; in the other, it is on the side of an "essential" that its whole discourse announces without being able to express. The literature placed under the sign of mysticism is very prolific, often even confused and verbose. But it is so in order to speak of what can be neither said nor known.

Another paradox: even though mystical phenomena had the character of the exceptional, even of the abnormal, those presenting these extraordinary events experienced them as the local and transitory traces of a universal reality, as expressions overflowing with the excess of a presence that could never be possessed.

Finally, these often spectacular manifestations always returned to what remained mystical, that is to say hidden. Thus, two contraries coincide in the expression "mystical phenomena": what is "phenomenal" appears and is visible; what is "mystical" remains secret and invisible.

Mysticism cannot be reduced to either of the aspects that always comprise this paradox. It is held within their relation. It is undoubtedly this relation itself. It is therefore

an object that escapes [*qui fuit*]. It alternately fascinates and irritates. With these mystical events the proximity of the essential seems to be announced. But if, in dealing with a language of the "unsayable," critical analysis rejects this language as lacking in rigor, as a commentary too encumbered with images and impressions, it will encounter nothing more in the field of observation than psychological curiosities or small marginal groups. In order to avoid this choice between an "essential" that ends by vanishing beyond language into the "unsaid," and strange phenomena that cannot be isolated without being rendered insignificant, we must return to what the mystic says of his or her own experience, to the individual perception of observable facts.

The Event

Psychosomatic events which are classified as mystical pose a particular problem. Extraordinary phenomena seem at first to specify mysticism. They contrast strongly with ordinary life. They stand out in the observable like the signs of a foreign language. But this irruption of strange symptoms only signals moments or thresholds that are in fact quite specific. Mystical life is comprised of experiences that initiate or transform it. These "moments" are like throwing open a window into one's dwelling; they give a new sense of ease, allow a breath of fresh air to enter one's life. The song of a bird that reveals to the shaman his vocation, the spoken word that pierces the heart, the vision that turns one's life upside down—these are decisive experiences, indissociable from a place, a meeting, a reading, but not reducible to the means that convey them. "It happened *there*" the mystic can say, because he keeps, engraved in his memory, the smallest circumstances of that instant; the precision of the memories in any "life" or "autobiography" demonstrates this. But, he adds, "It was not *that*," because for him the experience has to do with something other than a site, an impression, or a certain knowledge.

These privileged events can be found outside mystical life. Julien Green, for example, writes in his *Journal* of a moment akin to the "oceanic feeling" of Romain Rolland:

> *Dec. 18, 1932. A few moments ago, I paused beneath one of the porticoes of the Trocadero to view the prospect of the Champ-de-Mars. It was as if it were springtime, a luminous mist floating above the gardens. Sounds had that buoyant, airy quality that they only have on the first fine days of spring. For two or three seconds, I relived a whole part of my youth—my sixteenth, my seventeenth year. This made a strange impression on me, more painful than agreeable. Nevertheless, there existed an accord between myself and this landscape so profound that I asked myself, as I used to do in earlier days, if it would not be delicious to dissolve into all of this, like a drop of water into the ocean—to not have a body any longer, but just enough of a consciousness to be able to think: "I am a tiny part of the universe. The universe is happy in me. I am the sky, the sun, the trees, the Seine, and the houses on its banks. . . ." This strange thought has never completely left me. After all, it is perhaps something of this kind that awaits us on the other side of death. And, suddenly, I was filled with such happiness that I returned home with the feeling that I should preserve the memory of this great mirage, as I would a rare and precious thing.*

The surprise produces strangeness but it also liberates. It draws to the surface a secret of life and death. Something is introduced into the consciousness that is not itself consciousness but the annihilation of consciousness, or the spirit of which consciousness seems to be the surface, or an unfathomable law of the universe. The unsuspected, that

has the violence of the unforeseen, gathers together all the days of existence, as the whistle of the shepherd gathers his flock, and reunites them in the continuity of a disquieting relationship with the other.

The mystical experience often has the same form as this, although ordinarily it engages in another kind of relationship with that which suddenly comes to it. In the West, it is the discovery of an Other as essential or inevitable that defines this relationship. In the East, it is more a rending of the fragile veil of an ungrounded consciousness [*in-fondée*] under the pressure of a reality that engulfs it. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to name what happens; it seems to rise up from some unfathomable dimension of existence, as from an ocean whose origins precede mankind. The very term "God" (or "Absolute"), rather than providing a guidepost for the experience, receives its meaning from this dimension. Language will be transformed by it. Already life is changed by it: "When the divine touch flows in you, it turns your habits upside down," said Ibn 'Ata' Allah of Alexandria, a Moslem mystic of the twelfth century, and he cited a saying from the Koran: "If kings enter a village, they will damage it" [xxvii, 34].

Under the shock of an analogous experience, Jean-Joseph Surin wrote in 1636:

> *His work is to destroy, to ravage, to abolish and then to remake, to reestablish, to resurrect. He is marvelously terrible and marvelously sweet; and the more terrible he is, the more desirable and alluring. In his actions, he is like a king who, marching at the head of his armies, brings everyone to their knees. . . . If he takes everything away, it is in order to expand without limits. If he separates, it is in order to unite to himself that which he separates out from all the rest. He is miserly and liberal, generous and jealous of his interests. He demands everything and he gives everything. Nothing can satiate him and nevertheless he contents himself with little since he has need of nothing.*

A description of the experience rather than of God, this text tells of a manifestation that does not receive its verification or rationale from the outside world. The only justification for the truth that comes to light is a "recognition" that is yet nothing more than a mark of that truth. It springs, in a way, from the very adhesion that it brings about. "How true it is!"; the mystic has nothing else to say under the blow that both wounds and delights him. There the unbelievable and the obvious coincide. It is a transformation and a revelation.

It is impossible to identify the event with a particular instant in time because of what it awakens in the memory and because of all the life experience [*le vécu*] that emerges in that particular moment. By the same token, it is also impossible to reduce it to the product of a long preparation, since it happens unexpectedly, as a "gift," and is unforeseeable.

No one can say, "It is my truth" or "It is me." The event imposes itself. In a very real sense, it alienates. It pertains to the same order as ecstasy: that is, to that which transports one outside oneself. It expels one from the self instead of gathering one to it. But it has the characteristic of opening up a space that the mystic can no longer live without. Indissociable from the assent that is its criterion, such a "birth" draws from man a truth that is his without coming from him or belonging to him. Thus, he is "outside himself" at the very moment that a Self is asserted. A necessity is aroused in him, but under the sign of a melody, a spoken word, or a vision coming from elsewhere.

The Discourse of Time: An Itinerary

The paradox of the mystical "moment" refers to a history. What is asserted there is something that has already been said elsewhere and will be said otherwise, something that in itself rejects the privileging of a present and refers to other indicators—those past and

those to come. The perceived Trace—connected to encounters, to experiences [*apprentissages*], to readings—extends the fissure of an Absence or a Presence throughout the whole network of familiar signs that bit by bit are seen to have been misunderstood. The event cannot be reduced to its initial form. It calls for a beyond [*un au-delà*] to what was only a first unveiling. It opens up an itinerary.

The mystical experience will unfold in discourse and mystical process without being able to stop at this first moment or to content itself with merely repeating it. A mystical life is begun when it recovers its roots and experiences its strangeness in ordinary life—when it continues to discover in other ways what has occurred that first time.

This movement beyond [*l'au-delà*] the event is history—history already made or yet to be made. The movement beyond personal intuition is the social plurality. The movement beyond the surprise that has touched the depths of the emotions is a discursive unfolding, a reorganization of the known through a confrontation with other kinds of knowledge or modes of knowing. The experience that could streak across the consciousness like a flash of lightning in the night is diffused through these different aspects into a multiplicity of relationships between consciousness and spirit, in all the registers of language, action, memory, and creativity. Such is at least the case for many mystics. For others, in a more Eastern tradition, it is silence that progressively extends its effects, attracting to itself, one by one, the activities of being. At any rate, the very thing that the mystics recognized could not be circumscribed in the particular forms of a privileged instant. God, whose absent proximity they perceived in the form of a space that opened out into such a precise place in their lives, cannot be limited to that place. He cannot be identified or confined to the site that he has nevertheless touched. One cannot arrest him there.

This internal exigency and the objective situation of the experience already allow one to distinguish a spiritual sense of the experience from its pathological forms. A process is "spiritual" when it is not confined to a single moment, no matter how intense or exceptional that moment may be, when it does not dedicate everything to its revival as if it were a paradise to recover or preserve, when it does not lose its way in imaginary fixations. It is realistic, engaged, as the Sufis say, in the *ihlās*—on the track of an authenticity that begins with the relationship with oneself and others. It is therefore discriminating. It relativizes the ecstasy or the stigmata as a sign that would become a mirage if one were to stop there. The mystic does not identify the essential with the "facts" that initiated or traced the progress of a fundamental perception. The essential is not the ecstasy, or the stigmata, or anything exceptional—not even the affirmation of a Law or a One. Al-Hallādj described this in a letter to one of his disciples; in it he called into question all the certainties upon which the community of believers (the Moslem *umma*) had been founded:

> *My son, may God hide from you the apparent meaning of the Law and reveal to you the truth of impiety! Because the apparent meaning of the Law is hidden impiety and the truth of impiety is manifest knowledge. Now therefore: praise to God, who manifests Himself upon the point of a needle to whomsoever He will and who hides Himself in the heavens and on the earth from whomsoever He will, with the result that one attests that "He is not" and the other attests that "There is only Him." Neither is he who professes the negation of God rejected, nor is he who confesses his existence praised. The intent of this letter is that you explain nothing by God, that you extract not a single argumentation from him, that you desire neither to love him nor to not love him, that you do not confess his existence and that you are not inclined to deny it. And above all, refrain from proclaiming his Unity!*

The greatest of Moslem mystics do not trust in any appearance; even the most sacred law, the most fundamental affirmation of the believer still belongs to the order of "appearances" in comparison with a Reality that is never given "as such" [*comme ça*], directly, or caught in the net of an institution, a body of knowledge, or an experience.

In seventeenth-century France Constantin de Barbanson, along with scores of others more famous, no longer relativized the Law, which is for Islam the rule of faith, but rather the "ecstasy" and the "ravishment," the traditional beginnings and marks of mysticism:

> *It is an actual touch of the divine operation in the superior part of the mind which so suddenly seizes the creature that, by drawing one's attention away from the inferior parts, the creature is completely absorbed in the attention one gives to an operation within the mind so powerful that the exterior senses . . . are left completely suspended, emptied and prevented from operating. . . . What is only an exterior effect, all too visible in the eyes of men that admire only extraordinary things of this kind, is something more to be fled than to be desired.*

In his language, which distinguishes between psychic and spiritual levels according to a hierarchy of planes, Constantin de Barbanson concludes that this "operation," although "admired by many," is a "sign that the soul at its core is still relatively unrefined," even if it is already "quite highly elevated."

"And I say," writes Meister Eckhart, "that God is neither being nor reason; nor does He know this or that. This is why God is empty of all things and why He is all things." These early writers refer to conceptions of man that have become foreign to us; but in relativizing their assertions, be they institutional or exceptional, they have the clarity [*netteté*] characteristic of the whole mystical tradition. Everywhere the same reaction makes itself understood. The greatest of mystics—John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, for example—repeat it: the extraordinary does not characterize the mystical experience any more than its conformity to an orthodoxy. It is rather characterized by the relationship that connects each of these moments to others, as one word connects with other words, in a symbology of meaning.

The Social Language of Mysticism

The mystic is driven by each experience toward a more radical interiority [*en-deçà*] also expressed as a "beyond" [*au-delà*] exceeding one's strongest moments. The unity that draws the mystic "into himself," as some say, also pushes him forward toward as yet unforeseeable stages of his journey, for which he or others will construct a vocabulary in view of a language that belongs to no one. One moment the mystic will say, "What I have experienced is nothing compared to what is coming," and the next, "Other witnesses must attest to the fragment that is my experience." Mystical language is a social language. Consequently, each "enlightened one" [*illuminé*] is brought back to the group, borne towards the future, inscribed within a certain history. For the mystic, to "prepare a place" for the Other is to prepare a place for others.

The exceptional nature of what happens to the mystic ceases to be a privilege in order to become the index of a particular place that the mystic occupies within his or her group, within a history, within the world. The mystic is only one among many others. A similar movement inserts the mystic within a social structure and makes him accept his death: these are two modalities of the limit—that is, of joining with others and with the Other. Certainly, a "hidden" life finds its effectiveness at the very moment that it loses itself in that which is revealed within itself to be greater than itself. For mystics, the difficulties, the "tests" and trials, the obstacles and conflicts have the meaning of indicating to them

their own death, the specificity of their own speech, and their true relationship with what has been given them to know. This effacement within ordinary language is finally the modesty of the mystic. An immersion in the common nescience is likewise evidence of this modesty; this is illustrated in the discreet manner in which a fourth-century Egyptian monk speaks of this modesty in the *Apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers*: "Truly, Abbot Joseph has found the way, because he has said: 'I do not know.'"

The redirecting of the personal life to the social life is simply a return to origins. It is not only a gesture that reveals the truth of the ecstasy: it allows what has preceded it and made it possible—a sociocultural situation—to resurface. But it discloses a meaning to this anonymity of facts. The "There is" or "There was"—the historical, linguistic, or psychological data [*données*] of a situation—is transformed because it is now recognized as given [*donné*]. At the beginning of everything, there is a gift [*un donné*].

Spiritual perception does indeed unfold within a mental, linguistic, and social organization that precedes and determines it. As has been known since Herskovits, experience is always defined culturally, even if such experience is mystical. It receives its form from a milieu that structures it before all explicit consciousness. It obeys the law of language. Thus a neutral element and an order assert themselves just as much as the meaning that the mystic uncovers there.

"Language" refers not only to the syntax and vocabulary of a certain tongue—that is to say, the combination of apertures and closures that determine the possibilities of comprehension—but also to the codes of recognition, the organization of the imaginary, the sensory hierarchizations in which smell or sight predominate, the fixed constellation of institutions or doctrinal references, and so forth. There is a rural and an urban register of mystical experience. Some epochs are characterized by exorbitancies of the eye and olfactory atrophy; others, by the hypertrophy of the ear or sense of touch. A sociology can classify mystical manifestations and even visions in the same way. In a minority group, for example, the testimony is presented as a persecuted truth; the witness, as a martyr; the representations, as a pierced heart or an illuminated illiterate.

From this point of view, the mystic speaks only a received language, even if the mystical "excess"—the wound and the opening of meaning (or what, with Derrida, one might call the "hyperbolic moment")—is not identifiable with the historical structure on which its form and very possibility both depend. Thus, in the case of the shepherdess Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), a complete language emerges from a silent Westphalia, hidden away from the literati. Such a language fascinated the romantic poet Clement Brentano, who made himself its scribe. Due to this alliance between the aristocratic poet and the mystic villager, the discourse of the "visionary" woman brought the "savage" tongue of a rural world to the surface of a written "literature." A subterranean organization was brought to light, unveiling and multiplying the resources of a peasant tradition within the very mystical experience that sprang from it. Emerging from obscurity, a whole pastoral people reveals itself in the poem of gestures and visions through which Catherine narrates the scenes of the life of Jesus, scenes which for her were contemporary. The popular immensities of which she is the echo are indissociable from the "divine depths" of which she speaks.

In its various forms the vast, latent structurations of language are always articulated upon the desire and the surprise of the mystic to which they provide a geographical site and a historical determination.

The Body of the Spirit

It is not enough to refer to the social body of language. Meaning is written through the letter and the symbol of the physical body. Mystics receive from their bodies the law, the

place, and the limit of their experience. The "experienced" monk, Philoxène de Mabboug, once dared to say, "The sensible is the cause of the conceptual; the body is the cause of the soul and precedes it in the intellect."

Prayer is also first and foremost a discourse of gestures. "How to pray?—It is not necessary to use a lot of words," replied Macarius. "It is enough to hold one's hands stretched high." Arsenius, another "Desert Father," would remain standing every night, turning his back to the setting sun; he held his hands extended toward the Levant "until the sun once again illuminated his face: then he would sit down." His physical vigilance was the language of desire, like a tree in the night; there was no need to break the silence with words.

The preceding instances are merely indicative. In any case, the mystic "somatizes," interprets the music of meaning with his or her corporeal repertoire. One not only plays one's body; one is played by it, as if the piano or trumpet were the composer and the player only the instrument. In this regard, stigmata, levitation, visions, and the like reveal and adopt the obscure laws of the body, the extreme notes of a scale never completely enumerated, never entirely domesticated, aroused by the very exigency of which it is sometimes the sign and sometimes the threat.

A dangerous closeness—dangerous for its witnesses, but even more for society—often binds, at the limits of experience, the "mystical" to the "pathological." The bonds between madness and truth are enigmatic and do not constitute a relation of necessity. But it is still more erroneous to posit social conformity as the criteria of spiritual experience. Psychological "balance" complies with social norms (however changeable) that the mystic transgresses again and again, just as Jacob crossed the ford of the Yabboq once he had been seized on the other bank by the nocturnal angel.

From the "deeper body" and through it arose the very movement that finally characterized "mystical" language: that of expressing an essential in the mode of a sidestep [*un écart*]. Its gesture is to pass beyond, through the "phenomena" that always risk being taken for the "Thing" itself.

Actually, mystical manifestations express what Nietzsche was aiming at ("I am a mystic," he said, "and I do not believe in anything") when he referred to a beyond emerging within language: he wrote, "*Es spricht*" ("It speaks"); a nonsubject (stranger to all individual subjectivity) demystifies consciousness, its clear surface muddied by the stirred waters of the deeps. In *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), Heidegger refers similarly to an *Es gibt*—which means not only "there is," but "it gives" [*ça donne*]: there is a given which is also giving. It is this fulfilling deprivation that Surin speaks of when he places his *Spiritual Canticle* under the sign of a "lost child" and "wanderer":

Happy death, happy sepulchre
Of this lover, in Love absorbed
Who sees no longer grace nor nature
But the sole abyss into which he has fallen.

A disconcerting (one could say "disconcerted") itinerary, moving from side to side. Through this historical mode is insinuated and made manifest what Toukârâm (a seventeenth-century Marathi mystic) also sings of at the end of his *Songs of the Pilgrim*, in order to give their meaning to his itineraries over the roads of India:

I am going to say the unsayable
I live my death
I am because I am not.

3

Mysticism and Religions

In 1941 René Daumal wrote: "I have just successively read some texts on *bhakti*, some quotations from Hassidic authors and a passage of Saint Francis of Assisi; to these I add some Buddhist words and I am struck yet again by the observation that something is the same in all of them" [*La mystique et les mystiques* in Ravier]. But this use of the singular "mysticism" [*la mystique*], as opposed to the plural "religions"—does it not depend upon the fact that these passages are considered by the same reader? On the one hand, there exists no single point of observation from which it would be possible to contemplate mysticism independently of some sociocultural or religious tradition, thereby specifying "objectively" the relationship that it maintains with such traditions: there is, for any consideration of mysticism, no viewpoint from Sirius. Whether it wishes to be or not, any Western analysis is situated within the context of a culture marked by Christianity. On the other hand, within Western science as well as Western experience, mysticism implies a distancing from established Church authority. It indicates the unity of a modern lay reaction before sacred institutions. These two coordinates determine the site of any current interpretation of mysticism and religions.

The Plurality of Religious Structures

Even if studies from Asia and Africa also consider mysticism in the singular, they restore its plurality when they reinterpret Western mysticism in terms of reference proper to them. This distance between heteronomous analyses makes evident the differences that delineate entire traditions; they can be classed according to three types of criteria.

First of all, the relationship to time is decisive. It demarcates a Western tradition of Christian origin based upon a certain event and thus upon the plurality of history. Antiquity, or Hindu civilization, presents a more "henological" form of mysticism, characterized by the reascension towards the *One*, or by the porosity of the physical world: history is open to the immanent reality that it veils under appearances. Of the various theologies that correspond to this first distinction, the former places a Trinity at the heart of the mystery, establishes at least the gap of creation between God and man, and considers a community to be the privileged form of manifestation; the latter, oriented by the sun of a sole Principle, reveal within all being the diffusion of Being and destines each one to ultimate nondistinction.

Second, the traditions that refer to a Scripture differentiate themselves from those that give primacy to the Voice. Here one finds a spirituality of the Law (too seldom evoked, since the Law itself rejects the name of "mysticism") that casts, between the transcendence of God and the fidelity of the servant, the barrier of a "letter" to observe: for example, Jewish mysticism of the 108th Psalm, a mysticism born of a modesty that denies man the pretension of "becoming God" and establishes "sons" within the reverential love of the Father. A certain Protestant tradition maintains this inaccessibility of the God who is promised but not given to believers who are called but not justified. To this tendency is opposed a mysticism of the Voice, that is to say, of a presence that reveals itself in human signs and elevates all interhuman communication by actually animating it.

Finally, experiences and doctrines are distinguished according to the priority that they accord either to vision (contemplation) or to the spoken word. This first tendency emphasizes knowledge, the radicality of exile, the unconscious initiations that free one from consciousness, the solitude of silence, and "spiritual" communion: such are the "gnostic" mystics and the mystics of *Eros*. The second tendency links the call with a

praxis, the message with work and the civic community, the recognition of the absolute with an ethics, and "wisdom" with brotherly relationships: such are the mystics of *agape*.

Unity through a Distancing from Religions

The interest in mystics and the fascination they inspire imply a new kind of relationship with religions. In the West, the study of mysticism is currently less determined by the scientific necessity of defending the mind against churches that are today increasingly in the minority. But because of this new situation, this study has been led to consider mystical language as a symbol—possibly the metaphor—of a hidden "Essence" that must be identified philosophically, or a "meaning of life" to be elucidated in the conceptual terms of a society that has ceased to be religious.

From this point of view, mysticism is less a heresy or a liberation from religion than an instrument for the work of unveiling, *within* religion itself, a truth that would first be formulated in the mode of a margin inexpressible in relation to orthodox texts and institutions, and which would then be able to be exhumed from beliefs. The study of mysticism thus makes a nonreligious exegesis of religion possible. It also gives rise, in the historical relation of the West to itself, to a reintegration that eradicates the past without losing its meaning.

* * *

Like the ancient sphinx, mysticism remains the rendezvous of an enigma. It can be situated but not classified. In spite of the differences between civilizations, some interrelations exist that, in the West, grant spiritual prestige to East Indian or Buddhist traditions, and in the East, diffuse the seductions of Judaism and Christianity through their Marxist metamorphoses. Something irreducible nevertheless lingers, upon which reason itself depends—something whose phenomena reason attempts to "demystify" by displacing its myths, but of which it cannot disinfect a society. Perhaps, between exoticism and the "essential," the relationships will never be socially clarified. And this is the challenge and the risk of the mystic—to draw them into this precise and luminous clarity [*la nettezza*] that Catherine of Sienna held to be the ultimate sign of the spirit.

Translated by Marsanne Brammer

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